

The Calling of the Apostle Paul

by: George Stevens

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Acts 9:4

Introduction

I found myself hovering parallel to the ceiling, looking down at myself on the bed. My thought was, "I'd better get back!" It was at that point I heard a voice say my name in a firm, authoritative manner, "George!" I woke up immediately and looked for the speaker in the darkness of my room. There was no-one. So convinced was I that this was not a dream, I went to my parents' room and my sisters' room asking if they had called me. My parents hadn't and my sisters were sound asleep. I concluded that I had been dreaming, but was troubled by this for a long while - it had seemed so real!

Today, we are going to see someone who had a far more glorious experience but while he was wide awake! The man's name was Saul of Tarsus. The records of the event are found in the Bible in Luke's historical account of the Acts of the Apostles. In order to gain a full account of what exactly happened, you would need to read chapters 9, 22 and 26. It is one of those occasions when the Lord twice speaks the name of the person He is calling. Whenever this occurs, there are always special revelations or commissions given. We will consider Saul's conviction, condemnation, conversion, commission and calling.

Saul's conviction

Saul had previously guarded the clothing of those who stoned the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Instead of humbling him, the event seemed to spur him on to violently persecute all men and women who called on the Lord's name. By so doing, it was Saul's conviction that he was acting in the will of God. We read in the book of Acts: "And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest. And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1,2).

It was then that the Lord Jesus Christ called him. We read, "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:3-5).

Here, the astonished Saul links the brightness of the light with the Speaker who asked, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" It led Saul to call the Speaker, "Lord". "Who art thou, Lord?" he said. In the presence of that glorious light, Saul must have had the same experience of Daniel who, experiencing the presence of the Lord, wrote, "Therefore I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength" (Dan. 10:8). Job had a similar experience. Upon discovering the glory of God as the Creator, this self-righteous man had to say, "Behold, I am vile" (Job 40:4). Here, the abased Saul immediately acknowledged the lordship of the One who was calling him. "Who are thou, Lord?"

Saul's condemnation

The reply, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," must have been an arrow of condemnation piercing the heart of Saul. We cannot imagine the thoughts that must have raced through Saul's mind at that moment. Jesus, the one I have despised! Jesus, the one whom we had got rid of by crucifixion! Jesus, the one those he had tormented claimed had risen from among the dead! Jesus, the one they claimed had ascended into heaven. So, the words of the Saviour must have touched his conscience. Saul was immediately convicted of his sin as a persecutor.

At the same time, he must have realised the unique unity between the Lord Jesus Christ and those who had trusted Him. Saul had been persecuting Christian men and women, but Jesus counted it as a personal attack against Himself. Saul had reckoned that he was hunting down mere blasphemous humans in the will of God,

but found his religious zeal was actually aimed at the Lord of glory himself, namely, Jesus, Yahweh who saves! So in these words of Christ, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" lay the germ of the doctrine of the church as being one with Christ Himself, that is to say, His body. The term "church" has the meaning of "the assembly of called out ones" and refers to every true Christian whom God has gathered to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle was later to expound this teaching in his epistles.

Saul's conversion

If the first result of this event was to produce a spirit of humility in Saul, then the second result was the spirit of obedience for he asks, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" Saul believed! Upon believing, he was given a new life. This life showed its character in a desire to obey the Lord. It showed immediate commitment to the service of his Lord. It was the same with Isaiah. In chapter 6 of his book we read the words, "Who shall I send; and who will go for us?" Isaiah's response was immediate, "Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:8). Isaiah was prepared to obey the Lord without even knowing what he was to do. It turned out that his message was to be one of judgment. Saul acts in a similar way, "Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?"

Saul's commission

In Acts 26:16-18, we read about the commission given to Saul at that time. Jesus said, "But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee. Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me."

Five things may be seen in this commission to Saul:

Firstly, the purpose of it. Saul was to be a minister and witness of the things he had already seen. The force of the Greek word for "minister" is "under rower" which is a marine term used to denote one working under the direction of another. Saul was to work under the sole direction of Christ. This he did.

Secondly, the promise that the Lord Jesus would appear to him again with further revelations. In Galatians 1:11-17, the apostle Paul, as he was re-named, outlines how this happened: "For I neither received it (the Gospel) of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For ye have heard

of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years." It would seem that Saul separated himself to the Lord alone for a period before returning to Damascus. It was during that time, he received further revelations directly from the Lord Jesus.

Thirdly, that Saul would be saved from his enemies whether Jew or Gentile. Throughout his life as a Christian, Saul the hunter became Paul the hunted. But the Lord preserved him.

Fourthly, that he would persuade the Gentiles to believe the Gospel. This he did in the most untiring way and without depending upon any but his Lord.

Finally, he was to promote two aspects of the Gospel, namely, the forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those set apart to God.

Saul's calling

So the glory of the light and the authority of the voice, humbled Saul of Tarsus. His conversion resulted in an exciting development of the ways of God. On the one hand, his zealous persecution of Christians before his conversion made him to be so much the more conspicuous a witness of the Gospel after it. On the other hand, his commission by Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles was a new and distinct mission of mercy.

At the time of this heavenly calling, Saul was also told to go to Damascus where he would be told more about this commission. Physically blinded by that light, Saul was led into Damascus. In the three days that followed, Saul had a vision that a man named Ananias would come to him and restore his sight. Ananias is described as a "certain disciple". This suggests that he was a humble and retiring servant of the Lord. He didn't seem to have any great responsibility in the church. He also lived in Damascus and knew that Saul had been out to harm those believers who lived there, including himself. The Lord appeared to Ananias in a vision and told him where Saul was staying. He also informed him that Saul had seen a vision of a man called Ananias coming to him in order that he might regain his sight. Ananias expressed his fears to his Lord. Fear always makes a servant reluctant. Even though the Lord told him that Saul was praying, he was still afraid. Therefore, the Lord was firm with Ananias, "Go thy

way, for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16).

Ananias finally obeyed. He came to Saul, laid his hands on him and told him that he had been sent by the Lord, even Jesus, in order that he should regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost. So it was, and Saul was immediately baptized. Saul stayed for some days with the disciples in Damascus where he preached Christ as the Son of God in the local synagogues and proved that Jesus was this very Christ.

What a tremendous reversal! The man who had so vehemently persecuted the church of Christ was now the Christian who was as equally zealous in the promotion of Christ as the Son of the living God. It was no wonder that, after many days, the Jews wanted him dead. There was no greater witness to the life-changing Christ than this man - Saul of Tarsus. As a consequence, the man who had been led as blind into Damascus was the same man who some while later made his escape from that same city by being lowered down from a window in a basket by the wall. His sufferings for Christ had begun.

In 2 Corinthians 6:23-31, we read a list of the things that he suffered: "Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not? If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not."

The missionary journeys of the apostle Paul

The main history of Saul of Tarsus, or as we recognise him, the apostle Paul, is found in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 13:4 to the end of the book. Paul undertook his mission as apostle to the Gentiles, just as Peter had served as apostle to the Jews. His ministry may be divided into three main missionary journeys, and then a trip to Rome as a prisoner.

During his first missionary journey, Paul carried the message of Christ from Antioch (in Syria) to Cyprus and several cities in Asia Minor. While engaged in this circuit, we see Paul's pattern of establishing the churches. He would preach in the synagogues proving Jesus to be the Messiah (Acts 13:14-42). He would then establish a small number of believers as a local church and leave them in the care of the Holy Spirit. Later, he would re-visit wherever possible to establish their faith and ordaining elders (Acts 14:22-23). If unable to visit, then he would answer any queries by letter. While travelling the first time, Paul found Elymas the sorcerer trying to destroy the faith of the deputy of Cyprus. Elymas was told that the hand of the Lord was upon him and that he would be blinded (Acts 13:11). So it was, and the faith of Sergius Paulus, the deputy, was realised. In Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:48), Paul outlined how the Gospel applied to Gentiles besides Jews, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Furthermore, many Jews and Gentiles believed at Iconium (Acts 14). In the same chapter, we read of a cripple who was healed by the command of Paul (Acts 14:8-10). It was here that Paul was stoned - almost to death - by people stirred up to violence by jealous Jews from Antioch and Iconium (Acts 14:19). The results of this journey were reported to the Christians in Jerusalem where, through the wisdom of James, it was decided to put no rules upon the Gentiles besides those of no idolatry, no fornication and no eating things strangled and still containing blood (Acts 15).

His second missionary journey again took Paul and Silas to Asia Minor. At Lystra, he found and gained Timothy for the work (Acts 16:1). Paul would have liked to go to Asia, but was forbidden to do so by the Spirit. Instead, he had a vision which called him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). As he journeyed, he stopped at Philippi where Lydia's heart was opened to receive the gospel of Christ (Acts 16:14) and the Philippian jailer came to his knees before God having heard, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). He then sailed across to Macedonia and Greece, finally returning to Antioch via Ephesus and Caesarea. It was during these travels that he wrote his two letters to the Thessalonians.

The third missionary journey took Paul through Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, then back along the western and southern coasts of Asia Minor to Jerusalem. While on this tour, he wrote the letters to the Corinthians, Romans and Galatians.

On his way home from his third tour, Paul was repeatedly warned not to go to Jerusalem because of the prophesied danger of arrest, imprisonment and possibly death (Acts 21:4,11). He persisted in going, however, and shortly after his arrival was falsely accused by some Asiatic Jews of profaning the temple (Acts 21:28). He was tried before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23), then before Felix (Acts 24), Festus and Agrippa

(Acts 25-26), but since he appealed to the Emperor (Acts 25:12), he was sent to Rome for trial before Caesar.

During that journey, the ship was wrecked at Malta so crew and passengers had to winter there (Acts 27-28). When Paul finally reached Rome, he was allowed the liberty of his own hired house. There he spent two years, ministering the Word of God to all whom he could contact, and writing his prison epistles - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. There is not the time to go into the wonderful events that occurred on these journeys, but do take the time to read them for yourselves.

Although the book of Acts ends at this point in the history, there is considerable evidence that Paul won his freedom after this first imprisonment and that he travelled extensively again. It was during this time, no doubt, that he wrote 1 Timothy, Titus and also Hebrews. It is believed that Paul was then taken to Rome a second time and imprisoned. His second letter to Timothy was penned at this time, shortly before his execution.

Paul's letters

It is of profit to explore, albeit briefly, the epistles of Paul.

Romans

In his letter to the Romans he outlines that salvation is through faith rather than in keeping the law or seeking to do good works; that Gentiles and Jews are blessed in this way; and, no one was ever saved through any other means than by faith alone.

1 and 2 Corinthians

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses problems such as strife within the local church; the putting away of one practising evil; Christians taking their own brethren to court; personal impurity; marriage; idolatry; the woman's role in worship; the Lord's table and Lord's supper; spiritual gifts; the resurrection of Christ and believers; and, the care of the poor.

The second letter to the Corinthians involves two themes. The first is Paul's defence of his own ministry and the second is an appeal for the Corinthians to send financial help to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Galatians

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul warns the Christians not to be influenced by those Judaizers who were trying to put them under the law of the Old Testament again. He therefore insists that salvation is through faith and not through law-keeping.

Ephesians

The first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesians show the wonderful position and blessings that Christians have "in Christ". Chapters 2 and 3 unfolds the truth that all believers, Jew and Gentile, are members of the church of which Christ is the head. The last three indicate how to walk worthily of this privileged calling; how to live peacefully with each other; how to use the gifts that God had given to the church; and, how to be followers of God in general.

Philippians

His letter to the Philippians is marked by Christian joy and rejoicing. In it, Paul is thankful for their gift to him and that the gospel has spread as a result of his imprisonment. He encourages them to have the humble mind of Christ and to be at unity with one another. He warns them about false teachers while encouraging them to run the Christian race faithfully. He then promises that God will supply all their need. Finally, he advises the need for self-control, prayerful trust and a pure thought life.

Colossians

In Colossians, Paul turns the Christian's attention to the glories of Christ as Creator and Sustainer of all, as the very image of God, as the Head of the body (His church) and the greatness of His Person.

1 and 2 Thessalonians

First Thessalonians speaks of the coming of Christ as the blessed hope of all Christians and uses it as a lever to promote godly living.

Second Thessalonians teaches that Christ will come before the great departure from the faith and the revelation of the Antichrist. In the light of this, Christians should quietly earn their own livings and never grow weary in well doing, even in the face of persecution.

1 and 2 Timothy

The First epistle to Timothy outlines order in the church with particular regard to the local churches. Matters of bishops, deacons, prayer, dress and family and employer/servant responsibilities are all addressed.

In the second letter, he encourages Timothy to be resolute in the faith and fulfill his ministry. He recommends the Bible as the only source of authority as the days darken and predicts that the last days will be marked by wickedness.

Titus

His epistle to Titus outlines the qualifications of bishops and deacons in the church. In it, Paul orders

that all false teachers should be stopped and sound doctrine be both taught and obeyed.

Philemon

In the little letter to Philemon, Paul pleads the cause of Onesimus who was a slave who had run away from his master Philemon having stolen some of his goods. Paul asks Philemon to receive back Onesimus who had been

converted. Paul was prepared to make any loss to Philemon for Onesimus's crime. He asks Philemon to receive him back as a brother in Christ rather than as a slave. How this must have spoken to Paul himself who had persecuted the church of God and yet found an abundance of mercy with the Lord he had once despised and rejected.

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